

An insider explains how rural Christian white America has a dark and terrifying underbelly

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As the election of Donald Trump is being sorted out, a common theme keeps cropping up from all sides: “Democrats failed to understand white, working-class, fly-over America.”

Trump supporters are saying this. Progressive pundits are saying this. Talking heads across all forms of the media are saying this. Even some Democratic leaders are saying this. It doesn't matter how many people say it, it is complete BS. It is an intellectual/linguistic sleight of hand meant to draw attention away from the real problem.

The real problem isn't East Coast elites who don't understand or care about rural America. The real problem is that rural Americans don't understand the causes of their own situations and fears and they have shown no interest in finding out. They don't want to know why they feel the way they do or why they are struggling because they don't want to admit it is in large part because of the choices they've made and the horrible things they've allowed themselves to believe.

I grew up in rural Christian white America. You'd be hard-pressed to find an area of the country with a higher percentage of Christians or whites. I spent most of the first 24 years of my life deeply embedded in this culture.

I religiously (pun intended) attended their Christian services. I worked off and on on their rural farms. I dated their calico-skirted daughters. I camped, hunted and fished with their sons. I listened to their political rants at the local diner and truck stop. I winced at their racist/bigoted jokes and epithets that were said more out of ignorance than animosity.

I have watched the town I grew up in go from a robust economy with well-kept homes and infrastructure to a struggling economy with shuttered businesses, dilapidated homes and a broken-down infrastructure over the past 30 years. The problem isn't that I don't understand these people. The problem is they don't understand themselves or the reasons for their anger and frustration.

In deep-red America, the white Christian god is king, figuratively and literally. Religious fundamentalism has shaped most of their belief systems. Systems built on a fundamentalist framework are not conducive to introspection, questioning, learning, or change. When you have a belief system built on fundamentalism, it isn't open to outside criticism, especially by anyone not a member of your tribe and in a position of power.

The problem isn't that coastal elites don't understand rural Americans. The problem is that rural America doesn't understand itself and will *never* listen to anyone outside its bubble.

It doesn't matter how "understanding" you are, how well you listen, what language you use...if you are viewed as an outsider, your views will be automatically discounted. I've had hundreds of discussions with rural white Americans and whenever I present them any information that contradicts their entrenched beliefs, no matter how sound, how unquestionable, how obvious, they will not even entertain the possibility that it might be true. Their refusal is a result of the nature of their fundamentalist belief system and the fact that I'm the enemy because I'm an educated liberal.

At some point during the discussion, they will say, "That's your education talking," derogatorily, as a general dismissal of everything I said. They truly believe this is a legitimate response, because to them education is not to be trusted. **Education is the enemy of fundamentalism because fundamentalism, by its very nature, is not built on facts.**

The fundamentalists I grew up around aren't anti-education. They want their kids to know how to read and write. They are against quality, in-depth, broad, specialized education. Learning is only valued up to a certain point. Once it reaches the level where what you learn contradicts doctrine and fundamentalist arguments, it becomes dangerous.

I watched a lot of my fellow students who were smart, stop their education the day they graduated high school. For most of the young ladies, getting married and having kids was more important than continuing their learning. For many of the young men, getting a college education was seen as unnecessary and a waste of time. For the few who did go to college, what they learned was still filtered through their fundamentalist belief systems. If something they were taught didn't support a preconception, it would be ignored and forgotten the second it was no longer needed to pass an exam.

Knowing this about their belief system and their view of outside information that doesn't support it, telling me that the problem is coastal elites not understanding them completely misses the point.

Another problem with rural Christian white Americans is they are racists. I'm not talking about white hood-wearing, cross-burning, lynching racists (though some are). I'm talking about people who deep down in their heart of hearts truly believe they are superior because they are white. Their white god made them in his image and everyone else is a less-than-perfect version, flawed and cursed.

The religion in which I was raised taught this. Even though they've backtracked on some of their more racist declarations, many still believe the original claims.

Non-whites are the color they are because of their sins, or at least the sins of their ancestors. Blacks don't have dark skin because of where they lived and evolution; they have dark skin because they are cursed. God cursed them for a reason. If god cursed them, treating them as equals would be going against god's will. It is really easy to justify treating people differently if they are cursed by god and will never be as good as you no matter what they do because of some predetermined status.

Once you have this view, it is easy to lower the outside group's standing and acceptable level of treatment. Again, there are varying levels of racism at play in rural Christian white America. I know people who are ardent racists. I know a lot more whose racism is much more subtle but nonetheless racist.

It wouldn't take sodium pentothal to get most of these people to admit they believe they are fundamentally better and superior to minorities. They are white supremacists who dress up in white dress shirts, ties and gingham dresses.

They carry a bible and tell you, "everyone's a child of god" but forget to mention that some of god's children are more favored than others and skin tone is the criterion by which we know who is and isn't at the top of god's list of most favored children.

For us "coastal elites" who understand evolution, genetics and science, nothing we say to those in flyover country is going to be listened to because not only are we fighting against an anti-education belief system, we are arguing against god. You aren't winning a battle of beliefs with these people if you are on one side of the argument and god is on the other.

No degree of understanding this is going to suddenly make them less racist, more open to reason and facts. Telling "urban elites" they need to understand rural Americans isn't going to lead to a damn thing because it misses the causes of the problem.

Because rural Christian white Americans will not listen to educated arguments, supported by facts that go against their fundamentalist belief systems from “outsiders,” any change must come from within. Internal change in these systems does happen, but it happens infrequently and always lags far behind reality. This is why they fear change so much. They aren’t used to it. Of course, it really doesn’t matter whether they like it or not, it, like evolution and climate change even though they don’t believe it, it is going to happen whether they believe in it or not.

Another major problem with closed-off fundamentalist belief systems is they are very susceptible to propaganda. All belief systems are to some extent, but fundamentalist systems even more so because there are no checks and balances.

If bad information gets in, it doesn’t get out and because there are no internal mechanisms to guard against it, it usually ends up very damaging to the whole. A closed-off belief system is like spinal fluid—it is great as long as nothing infectious gets into it. If bacteria get into your spinal fluid, it causes unbelievable damage because there are no white blood cells to fend off invaders and protect the system. Without the protective services of white blood cells in the spinal column, infection spreads like wildfire and does significant damage in a short period of time. Once inside the closed-off spinal system, bacteria are free to destroy whatever they want.

The same is true with closed-off belief systems. Without built-in protective functions like critical analysis, self-reflection, openness to counter-evidence, and willingness to re-evaluate any and all beliefs, bad information in a closed-off system ends up doing massive damage in a short period of time.

What has happened to too many fundamentalist belief systems is damaging information has been allowed in from people who have been granted “expert status.” If someone is allowed into a closed-off system and their information is deemed acceptable, anything they say will be readily accepted and become gospel.

Rural Christian white Americans have let anti-intellectual, anti-science, bigoted racists like Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, the Stepford wives of Fox, and every evangelical preacher on television into their systems because these people tell them what they want to hear and because they sell themselves as being like them. The truth is none of these people give a rat's ass about rural Christian white Americans except how they can exploit them for attention and money. None of them have anything in common with the people who have let them into their belief systems with the exception that they are white and they speak the language of white superiority.

Gays being allowed to marry are a threat. Blacks protesting the killing of their unarmed friends and family are a threat. Hispanics doing the cheap labor on their farms are somehow viewed a threat. The black president is a threat. Muslims are a threat. The Chinese are a threat. Women wanting to be autonomous are a threat. The college educated are a threat. Godless scientists are a threat. Everyone who isn't just like them has been sold to them as a threat and they've bought it hook, line and grifting sinker.

Since there are no self-regulating mechanisms in their belief systems, these threats only grow over time. Since facts and reality don't matter, nothing you say to them will alter their beliefs.

"President Obama was born in Kenya, is a secret member of the Muslim Brotherhood who hates white Americans and is going to take away their guns." I feel ridiculous even writing this, it is so absurd, but it is gospel across large swaths of rural America. Are rural Christian white Americans scared? Damn right they are. Are their fears rational and justified? Hell no.

The problem isn't understanding their fears. The problem is how to assuage fears based on lies in closed-off fundamentalist belief systems that don't have the necessary tools for properly evaluating the fears.

I don't have a good answer to this question. When a child has an irrational fear, you can deal with it because they trust you and are open to possibilities. When someone doesn't trust you and isn't open to anything not already accepted as true in their belief system, there really isn't much, if anything, you can do. This is why I think the idea that "Democrats have to understand and find common ground with rural America," is misguided and a complete waste of time.

When a 2,700-year-old book that was written by uneducated, pre-scientific people, subject to translation innumerable times, and edited with political and economic pressures from popes and kings, is given higher intellectual authority than facts arrived at from a rigorous, self-critical, constantly re-evaluating system that can and does correct mistakes, no amount of understanding, respect or evidence is going to change their minds and assuage their fears.

Do you know what does change the beliefs of fundamentalists, sometimes? When something becomes personal. Many a fundamentalist has changed his mind about the LGBT community once his loved ones started coming out of the closet. Many have not. But those who did, did so because their personal experience came into direct conflict with what they believe.

My father is a good example of this. For years I had long, heated discussions with him about gay rights. Being the good religious fundamentalist he is, he could not even entertain the possibility he was wrong. The church said it was wrong, so therefore it was wrong. No questions asked. No analysis needed. This changed when one of his adored stepchildren came out of the closet. He didn't do a complete 180. He has a view that tries to accept gay rights while at the same time viewing being gay as a mortal sin because his need to have his belief system be right outweighs everything else.

This isn't uncommon. Deeply held beliefs are usually only altered, replaced under catastrophic circumstances that are personal. This belief system alteration works both ways. I know diehard, open-minded progressives who became ardent fundamentalists due to a traumatic event in their lives. A good example of this is the comedian Dennis Miller. I've seen Miller in concert four different times during the 1990s. His humor was complex, riddled with references and leaned pretty left on almost all issues. Then 9/11 happened. For whatever reasons, the trauma of 9/11 caused a seismic shift in Miller's belief system. Now he is a mainstay on conservative talk radio. His humor was replaced with anger and frustration. 9/11 changed his belief system because it was a catastrophic event that was personal to him.

The catastrophe of the Great Depression along with FDR's progressive remedies helped create a generation of Democrats out of previously diehard Republicans. People who had up until that point believed only the free market could help the economy, not the government, changed their minds when the brutal reality of the Great Depression affected them directly and personally.

I thought the financial crisis in 2008 would have a similar, though lesser impact on many Republicans. It didn't. The systems that were put in place after the Great Recession to deal with economic crises, the quick, smart response by Congress and the administration helped turn what could have been a catastrophic event into merely a really bad one. People suffered, but they didn't suffer enough to become open to questioning their deeply held beliefs. Because this questioning didn't take place, the Great Recession didn't lead to any meaningful political shifts away from poorly regulated markets, supply side economics or how to respond to a financial crisis. This is why, even though rural Christian white Americans were hit hard by the Great Recession, they not only didn't blame the political party they've aligned themselves with for years, they rewarded them two years later by voting them into a record number of state legislatures and taking over the U.S. House.

Of course, it didn't help matters that there were scapegoats available toward whom they could direct their fears, anger and white supremacy. A significant number of rural Americans believe President Obama was in charge when the financial crisis started. An even higher number believe the mortgage crisis was the result of the government forcing banks to give loans to unqualified minorities. It doesn't matter how untrue both of these things are, they are gospel in rural America.

Why reevaluate your beliefs and voting patterns when scapegoats are available?

How do you make climate change personal to someone who believes only god can alter the weather? How do you make racial equality personal to someone who believes whites are naturally superior to non-whites? How do you make gender equality personal to someone who believes women are supposed to be subservient to men by god's command? How do you get someone to view minorities as not threatening to people who don't live around minorities and have never interacted with them? How do you make personal the fact massive tax cuts and cutting back government hurts their economic situation when they've voted for such policies for decades? I don't think you can without some catastrophic events. And maybe not even then. The Civil War was pretty damn catastrophic, yet a large swath of the South believed—and still believes—they were right and had the moral high ground. They were/are also mostly Christian fundamentalists who believe they are superior because of the color of their skin and the religion they profess to follow. There is a pattern here for anyone willing to connect the dots.

“Rural white America needs to be better understood,” is not one of the dots. “Rural white America needs to be better understood,” is a dodge, meant to avoid the real problems because talking about the real problems is viewed as too upsetting, too mean, too arrogant, too elite, too snobbish. Pointing out that Aunt Bea's views of Mexicans, blacks and gays is bigoted isn't the thing one does in polite society. Too bad more people don't think the same about Aunt Bea's views. It's the classic, “You're a racist for calling me a racist,” ploy.

I do think rational arguments are needed, even if they go mostly ignored and ridiculed. I believe in treating people with the respect they've earned, but the key point here is "earned." I'll gladly sit down with Aunt Bea and have a nice, polite conversation about her beliefs about "the gays, the blacks and the illegals," and I'll do so without calling her a bigot and a racist. But this doesn't mean she isn't a bigot and a racist, and if I'm asked to describe her beliefs these are the only words that honestly fit. Just because the media, pundits on all sides and some Democratic leaders don't want to call the actions of many rural white Christian Americans racist and bigoted doesn't make them not so.

Avoiding the obvious only prolongs getting the necessary treatment. America has always had a race problem. The country was built on racism and bigotry. This didn't miraculously go away in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. It didn't go away with the election of Barack Obama. If anything, these events pulled back the curtain exposing the dark, racist underbelly of America that white America likes to pretend doesn't exist because we are the reason it exists. From the white nationalists to the white suburban soccer moms who voted for Donald Trump, to the far-left progressives who didn't vote at all, racism exists and has once again been legitimized and normalized by white America.

Here are the honest truths that rural Christian white Americans don't want to accept; until they accept these truths, nothing is going to change:

- Their economic situation is largely the result of voting for supply-side economic policies that have been the largest redistribution of wealth from the bottom/middle to the top in U.S. history.
- Immigrants haven't taken their jobs. If all immigrants, legal or otherwise, were removed from the U.S., our economy would come to a screeching halt and food prices would soar.
- Immigrants are not responsible for companies moving their plants overseas. The almost exclusively white business owners are responsible, because they care more about their shareholders (who are also mostly white) than about American workers.

- No one is coming for their guns. All that has been proposed during the entire Obama administration is having better background checks.
- Gay people getting married is not a threat to their freedom to believe in whatever white god they want to. No one is going to make their church marry gays, have a gay pastor or accept gays for membership.
- Women having access to birth control doesn't affect their lives either, especially women they complain about being teenage single mothers.
- Blacks are not "lazy moochers living off their hard-earned tax dollars" any more than many of their fellow rural neighbors. People in need are people in need. People who can't find jobs because of their circumstances, a changing economy or outsourcing overseas belong to all races.
- They get a tremendous amount of help from the government they complain does nothing for them. From the roads and utility grids they use to farm subsidies, crop insurance and commodities protections, they benefit greatly from government assistance. The Farm Bill is one of the largest financial expenditures by the U.S. government. Without government assistance, their lives would be considerably worse.
- They get the largest share of Food Stamps, Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security.
- They complain about globalization, yet line up like everyone else to get the latest Apple products. They have no problem buying foreign-made guns, scopes and hunting equipment. They don't think twice about driving trucks whose engines were made in Canada, tires made in Japan, radios made in Korea, and computer parts made in Malaysia.
- They use illicit drugs as much as any other group. But when other people do it is a "moral failing" and they should be severely punished, legally. When they do it, it is a "health crisis" that needs sympathy and attention.
- When jobs dry up for whatever reason, they refuse to relocate but lecture the poor in places like Flint for staying in failing towns.

- They are quick to judge minorities for being “welfare moochers,” but don’t think twice about cashing their welfare checks every month.
- They complain about coastal liberals, but taxes from California and New York cover their farm subsidies, help maintain their highways and keep the hospitals in their sparsely populated rural areas open for business.
- They complain about “the little man being run out of business,” and then turn around and shop at big-box stores.
- They make sure outsiders are not welcome, deny businesses permits to build, then complain about businesses, plants opening up in less rural areas.
- Government has not done enough to help them in many cases, but their local and state governments are almost completely Republican and so are their representatives and senators. Instead of holding them accountable, they vote them into office over and over and over again.
- All the economic policies and ideas that could help rural America belong to the Democratic Party: raising the minimum wage, strengthening unions, spending on infrastructure, renewable energy growth, slowing down the damage done by climate change, and healthcare reform. All of these and more would really help a lot of rural white Americans.

What I understand is that rural Christian white Americans are entrenched in fundamentalist belief systems; don’t trust people outside their tribe; have been force-fed a diet of misinformation and lies for decades; are unwilling to understand their own situations; and truly believe whites are superior to all races. No amount of understanding is going to change these things or what they believe. No amount of niceties will get them to be introspective. No economic policy put forth by someone outside their tribe is going to be listened to no matter how beneficial it would be for them.

I understand rural Christian white America all too well. I understand their fears are based on myths and lies. I understand they feel left behind by a world they don't understand and don't really care to. They are willing to vote against their own interests if they can be convinced it will make sure minorities are harmed more. Their Christian beliefs and morals are only extended to fellow white Christians. They are the problem with progress and always will be, because their belief systems are constructed against it.

The problem isn't a lack of understanding by coastal elites. The problem is a lack of understanding of why rural Christian white America believes, votes, behaves the ways it does by rural Christian white America.